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September 2, 1981

Dear Mr. Gregg:

We have received your letter of August 11 enclosing a letter from your constituent, Mr. Tad Simonson, concerning the August 1981 Reader's Digest article "Tragic Legacy in Laos" by Jane Hamilton-Merritt.

Like Ms. Hamilton-Merritt, the U.S. Government, including the Department of State, has long been deeply concerned over the disturbing reports of chemical warfare in Laos (as well as in other countries) and has actively demonstrated its concern through various fora.

-- Beginning in 1978, as a result of the alarming increase in refugee reports on the use of chemical weapons in Laos, the U.S. State Department on numerous occasions has raised the matter with the government of Laos and has proposed to the Lao government that it accede to the 1925 Geneva "protocol for the prohibition of the use in war of asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases, and of bacteriological methods of warfare."

-- In mid-1980, we initiated consultations on the problem with our allies and key neutral countries. With their support we then expanded consultations and began to stimulate broad international attention to the issue. Under U.S. and Western leadership and over the concerted opposition of the USSR, Vietnam and other communist states, the United Nations General Assembly in December 1980 overwhelmingly passed a resolution calling on the UN Secretary-General, with the assistance of medical and technical experts, to carry out an impartial investigation of the reports of chemical weapons use. The Secretary-General appointed a group of experts to undertake an investigation. The commission has held two sessions thus far to examine the available evidence. It has made clear that it believes that it should extend its investigations to the Lao refugee camps in Thailand. The Secretary-General is scheduled to report on the results of the investigations at the UN General Assembly this fall.

The Honorable
Judd Gregg,
House of Representatives.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR

REVIEWED BY T. Heaven DATE 8/31/82

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-- The U.S. is cooperating fully with the UN investigation and has already submitted a large volume of information to the Secretary-General, including unclassified reports and declassified intelligence information pertaining to the reported use of chemical weapons in Laos, and covering the period from 1975 to the present. This, we believe, is the report to which Ms. Hamilton-Merritt refers on page 98 of her article. We also provided the transcripts of the two open Congressional hearings, which were held on this subject on December 1979 and April 1980, and the text of H. Res. 512 "Condemning the use of chemical agents...as violating the spirit of international law and morality." We will continue to support and assist this UN investigation.

-- The U.S. Government is making a concerted effort to develop information/evidence on reports of chemical warfare in the field. Our Embassies in Bangkok and Vientiane have been particularly active in this regard since the reports first appeared and continue to interview and examine people who may have been chemical warfare victims. In addition, since 1979 the U.S. Government has dispatched three teams to Thailand from Washington specifically to interview refugees and investigate the reports.

The possible use of lethal chemical weapons in Laos or elsewhere should be and is an international concern, and is best answered by an international response, such as the UN panel of experts investigation now underway. The U.S. Government of course gives high priority to these investigations, and is continuing to gather information for submission to the international commission.

We welcome Ms. Hamilton-Merritt's desire to call the public's attention to this important matter. We disagree with some of her statistics and are disturbed by her failure to acknowledge the U.S. Government's frequently and publicly expressed appreciation to the Hmong people--including resettling over 50,000 in America--for their contribution to earlier U.S. efforts in Southeast Asia; but we fully share her deeply felt concerns about the possible use of lethal chemical weapons.

The continued interest and concern about this issue which you and other members of Congress have expressed is appreciated. I hope this letter puts our views and actions on this important matter in better perspective.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Fairbanks
Assistant Secretary
for Congressional Relations

Enclosure:

Correspondence Returned.

EA/VLK:RCPorter:jy 8/31/81
#117-1079:x23132
Clearances: EA/VLK:LDAnderson
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